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# Purity and Impurity on Residential Space of Hindu Temple Priests

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the residential space of Hindu temple priests, called Dikshitar, in South India. I will clarify how purity and impurity have an influence on their residence. In previous studies, the concepts of purity/impurity have been discussed in relation to social structure based on an ideological schema, a comprehensive argument concerning the status and hierarchy of the dualistic symbolism (Dumont 1980; Harper 1964; Mikame 1991). The everyday life of Hindu temple priests unfolds on a boundary between that of the otherworldly priest and of the ordinary man; Even though priests embody the concept of religious purity, they generate organic pollutions as human beings in their residential space.

In this article, I refer to Bourdieu's viewpoint on residential space. He saw architecture as an unconscious collection of tendencies that construct the interaction between us and our environment that we have created. Then, he saw architecture as an object-embodied habitus. I consider Dikshitar's house as the place where the practice regarding purity/impurity is created. Moreover, I focus on not only the architectural feature of Dikshitar's residence but also their family relations and relationships with outsiders, gender differences on their spatial perception and usage, and its change caused by modernizing influences.

**KEYWORDS:** Hinduism, Religious practice, Purity/Impurity, Residential Space, South India

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, I examine how purity and impurity as religious beliefs influence the residential space of Hindu temple priests, called Dikshitaras, in Chidambaram, South India.

In previous studies, the concepts of purity and impurity have been discussed in relation to social structure. L. Dumont (1980) argued that hierarchical concepts of purity and impurity characterize a caste society. E. B. Harper (1964: 194) considered purity as relative matter and compared apparently inflexible purity with more translatable and flexible impurity. He also discussed the structure of ritual impurities, including both gods and human beings. These studies indicated that, in order to protect religious purity, upper castes were more strict in adhering to religious rules concerning purity and impurity. K. Mikame (1991) pointed out that learning behavior on impurity is part of socialization process (education) to survive in a

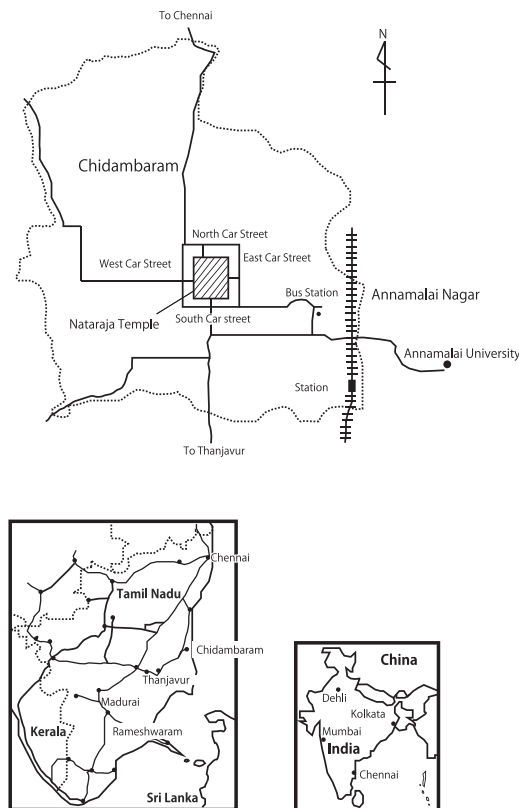


Figure 1. Map of India, Tamil Nadu, and Chidambaram

caste society. He argued that such behavior enables people to internalize the social structure through daily reprise of attitudes to impurity at home.

However, these studies were based on an ideological schema, or more specifically, a comprehensive argument on status and hierarchy of the dualistic symbolism of purity and impurity. Marriott (1955:198) discussed the relationship between caste and purity/impurity through sending and receiving of property, water, and food during rituals. However, he did not describe everyday exchanges, and he considered the relationship among castes through structural viewpoint of rituals. In a study on practical survival in a caste society, Freeman (1979) took the untouchable man Muli as an example and described how he survived by turning his low status, considered perpetually impure, into an asset.

This study addresses how the idea that purity/impurity define a caste society is practiced in real life. P. Bourdieu (1990) saw architecture as an unconscious collection of tendencies. It constructs the interactions between us and the environment that we have created. He saw architecture as an object-embodied habitus. Moreover, he also argued that residential space, especially a house, plays a vital role in building the schema of habitus. He researched the structure of houses focusing on the relationship between its physical properties and residents' movement (Bourdieu 1990; Tanabe 2002). In this study, I follow Bourdieu's view on residential space and understand it as a place where purity/impurity is practiced. In a housing study about purity/impurity, P. K. Prajapati *et al.* investigated dwellings of the Newar people based on Mikame (1975)'s study (Prajapati, Taniuchi, Shiotani 2008a; *ibid.* 2008b). Their study differs from others in presenting dynamic examples on spatial perception of residential purity/impurity, not only from ritualistic but also from behavioral point of view, such as sending/receiving of food. However, their study pays little attention to family relations and relationships among outsiders, to gender differences in usage and perception of space, as well as to changes triggered by modernization. In addition to incorporating these perspectives, I focus on everyday practices to examine the concept of purity/impurity in residential space of Hindu temple priests, with the highest status in local caste hierarchy.

Data used in this study is derived from participant observation and face-to-face interviews on room-layout of residential space and its changes, naming practices of space, its meanings and roles, and on use of space during rituals<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Dikshitaras

First, I will give a brief overview of Dikshitaras, features of their community, their lifestyles, gender in terms of purity/impurity, and the position of their houses in Chidambaram.

### 2-1 Summary

Tamil Nadu is located in the southernmost part of the Indian subcontinent, and is known

as the land of temples. The Chola kings constructed many great temples in various parts of Tamil Nadu between the tenth to thirteenth centuries. During this time, temple towns also included residential and commercial areas. Chidambaram is one such temple town, based around Nataraja temple. Dikshitar are one of the Brahmin castes<sup>2</sup>. They have enjoyed special privileges to perform religious activities and to manage Nataraja temple since the Chola Dynasty. Generally, Brahmin temple priests, including Dikshitar, are said to have strong exclusivism to maintain their high caste because they directly touch the god and perform religious rituals in the temple.<sup>3</sup> Not only the male priests working in the temple, but also their family and relatives are very sensitive about religious purity. They highly value their customs. Purity and impurity are strictly distinguished in their lives and customary practices. People who belong to other castes are prohibited from being invited, to eat together, or to enter kitchen spaces. The boundary between residents and visitors is clearly marked.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on field research conducted in Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, between February 2007 and January 2008, as well as September and October 2009. During the stay, I collected the following architectural data.

House Type	Dikshitar			Non-Dikshitar		
	Traditional House	Non-traditional House	Flat	Traditional House	Non-traditional House	Flat
Room Layout	3	5	4	2	4	3
Measurement Survey	1	1	0	1	0	0

Tamil words written in Roman characters are derived from *Tamil Lexicon* of Madras University.

<sup>2</sup> There are two kinds of Brahmin priests in Nataraja temple. One is a Dikshitar who performs religious activity only for gods and engages in management of this temple. Dikshitar never perform rituals for human beings including their own rites of passage. The other Brahmin priests called *vāṭṭiyār* belongs to Smartha Brahmin caste, perform Dikshitar's domestic ritual and sometime teach how to conduct the festival ceremony along with Dikshitar. However, they never directly perform the rituals for gods in Nataraja temple. Although some caste communities in Kumbakonam and Thiruvavur are called Yaga Dikshitar, they are clearly distinguished from Chidambaram Dikshitar. They must undergo initiations to become a Dikshitar, whereas in Chidambaram, they are by nature Dikshitar, without any initiation rituals. The term "Dikshitar" comes from a Sanskrit word "diksa" or "initiation". Moreover, one Dikshitar explained that "*deo*" means the fire god, Agni and "*akshita*" means the person who connects with the Agni. Agni represents Nataraja who signifies an enthusiastic dancing form of *Śiva* (personal interview with a Dikshitar in 2008).

<sup>3</sup> While the status of temple priest is generally regarded low among Brahmins, Dikshitar are an exception. I will describe in detail this later.

## 2-2 Community

Approximately 350 priests belong to Nataraja temple, and the Dikshitar community consists of around 100 households and a population of 1000. Most families have affinal ties because men must marry a Dikshitar woman in order to perform public worship (skt: *pūjā*) in Nataraja temple. As Parry (1980) pointed out, because temple priests have many opportunities to have contact with the devotees in the temple, they are generally vulnerable to absorbing impurity and sin. Thus, the priests are considered to have lower status within the Brahmin community. However, Dikshitaras in Chidambaram see themselves as the highest among Brahmin caste, and they are recognized as such by the local community (Tanaka 1993) for the following four reasons. First, there is a myth associated with Nataraja and the Dikshitar. Second is the original temple management, which Dikshitaras have struggled with and gained control of in their long history<sup>4</sup>. Third is their great pride in worship based on Vedic method<sup>5</sup>. Fourth is that their rituals are performed only for gods.<sup>6</sup> This last point particularly distinguishes them from rest of the Brahmins, acknowledging that Dikshitar's religious status is higher.

## 2-3 Gender and Purity/Impurity in Daily Life

Status of women is a specific feature of Dikshitar (Tanaka 1993: 130). This is both in terms of their chastity and ritualistic impurity. In Sangam literature<sup>7</sup>, the origin of woman's ritual power (skt: *Śakti*) exists in her chasteness (*karpu*). The concept that a wife's unchastity leads to her husband's misfortune has prevailed in Tamil Brahmin society since the Sangam period (Hart 1973: 237). A woman, who has attained sexual maturity after her first menstruation, is considered to hold a sacred power to torture a man. Living area for Dikshitar women tend to be restricted, and it is deemed unacceptable for them to go outside, except for their relatives' houses and temples. After marrying to their in-laws' house, their lives do not

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<sup>4</sup> Tanaka (1993) has described in details about the organization and management of Nataraja temple.

<sup>5</sup> While the ritual of other temples is based on *Āgama*, that of Nataraja temple is based on the most classical sacred books, *Vēda*, which is much older than *Āgama*. Dikshitaras follow the "Vaidika" method as propounded by revered sage *Patañjali* (Ramalinga Dikshitar 1965: 7-2). There are four patrilineal clans, called gotra; Ravikhshanya gotra, Kaundinya gotra, Srivatsa gotra, and Visvamitra gotra. They are the followers of *Yajur Vēda* or *Rig Vēda* depending on their own gotra.

<sup>6</sup> Priests are generally called to each domestic rite of passage to chant a particular mantra in the naming ceremony, the sacred thread ceremony, and marriage ceremony. Dikshitaras never perform these human-related rituals. Their own rites of passage are conducted by an exclusive domestic priest.

<sup>7</sup> The Sangam (*Caṅkam*) is the oldest Tamil literature. This is a collection of lyric poems, mainly from the first to third centuries. They are important materials for learning the ancient Tamil way of life, philosophy of life, and aesthetics before the spread of Aryan culture.

go beyond the square of the four car streets around Nataraja temple. They never go out of Chidambaram without being accompanied by their husbands. The famous local saying—“A girl born in Tillai<sup>8</sup> has never crossed the border (*Tillaipeṇ ellai tāṇṭātu*)”—clearly indicates an extremely strict regulations imposed on Dikshitar women. Although some women obtain academic degrees mostly through correspondence courses, majority are housewives, involved solely in domestic life after marriage. In fact, their priority is to perform daily religious practices according to traditional customs and to participate in relatives’ rites of passage and temple rituals.

Impurity (*tīṭṭu*) includes death, birth, and menstruation<sup>9</sup>. Having a contact with the idol of god at home or worshiping god in the temple during the three days of menstrual period is a taboo. During this time, a Dikshitar woman goes back to her parents’ home and never engage in housework. Generally, she spends a relaxing time watching TV, listening to radio, or reading in an isolated room such as one with an earthen floor. Although the woman is forced into reclusion for ritual impurity, this is the only time where she, normally occupied with housework and family care, can rest without doing anything, like “a vacation” (Harper 1960: 1958). Unmarried woman would do the same during her menstrual period, but they may go to school as usual. They would be separated from other family members and spend a quiet time in another room at home. She eats food in the isolated room after her family members have eaten.

During a wife’s menstrual period, her husband cannot perform temple rituals nor can he have any contact the idol. He also cannot do these things during his wife’s pregnancy. Cutting hair, nails, or shaving mustache are also taboo. This rule is optional until the sixth month of pregnancy, but is compulsory afterwards. It continues until a naming ceremony (skt: *nāmakaraṇa*) that takes place on the tenth day after baby’s birth.

On conjugal relations of Dikshitar, it is generally said that a Hindu wife is subordinate to her husband. This tendency is very strong in Chidambaram<sup>10</sup>. I frequently heard priests saying, “husband is the first god for a woman.” While this may be true, it is not necessarily appropriate to suggest that Dikshitar women are suppressed. This is partly because of their

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<sup>8</sup> Tillai is an old name of Chidambaram.

<sup>9</sup> Sekine (1989) examined the concepts of pollution and its practical usage in a Southern village, Tamil Nadu. He called the pollution *tīṭṭu*, which includes a potentially creative aspect. He analyzed the concept through the case of lower caste Hindus.

<sup>10</sup> The gods are mostly enshrined with their wives as a couple. In Tamil Nadu, the wife goddess is sometimes more popular than her husband God such as Madurai Meenakshi. The wife goddess Meenakshi is much more famous and a powerful symbol of Madurai city than the husband god, Sundareshwara. Madurai is synonymous with gray mare. The consort goddess is most central and dominant. In Chidambaram, the husband Nataraja is more popular and is synonymous with a chauvinistic husband among local Tamil people (Daniel 1980: 64).

strong conjugal ties. A wife holds a special position among Dikshitar. When a husband performs a ritual after marriage, his wife must visit the house of his family and participate in it. During the ritual, the wife touches her husband's shoulder with a sheaf of sacred grass (skt: *kuśa*, *Imperata cylindrica*) and expresses that she always stands alongside. Only a married man is qualified to perform rituals as a temple priest. If he loses his wife, he also loses his qualification.

Nataraja temple is the only place where the priest is prevented from performing rituals during his wife's menstruation period. Moreover, these customs related to menstruation indicate that wife has a close relationship with her parents' home. In North India, because the in-law's house is far from her parents', the daughter is often isolated (Kolenda 1984). However, in the Dikshitar community, all houses are located within a walkable distance. If the wife has nothing to work on at her in-laws' house, she visits her parents' house almost every day, not only during her relatives' rites of passage that are frequently held. While the wife should basically follow her in-laws' policy, any complaints about her husband or other in-laws will be immediately conveyed to her own parents. Sometimes her parents may directly negotiate with the daughter's in-laws. Since the size of the community in the residential area is small, every piece of information is likely to be spread. Allowing a wife to make free contact with her own parents influences the woman's behavior positively and prevents her from being isolated. It also works as a kind of safety net.

#### 2-4 Residential Area of the Dikshitar

The traditional temple town of Chidambaram has changed due to the influence of motorization and modernization. The residential area of Dikshitar has concentrated in North, East, and South *Sannathi*<sup>11</sup>, East Car Street, and South Car Street<sup>12</sup>, based on traditional structure of a south Indian temple<sup>13</sup>. Most of their property located in the center of the town has been sold for financial reasons. Three or four-story buildings have been constructed on those land. Some of them have built new houses in a suburb for themselves. This kind of buildings is referred to as a flat. Not only Dikshitar's families, but also many residents of other communities reside in these flats. While it is difficult to observe the hierarchical structure from the past, ownership of some flats is restricted to Brahmin residents. They strictly prohibit the residents from eating meat and drinking alcohol.

East Car Street is a transit point for Chidambaram bus terminal. Since all tourist buses

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<sup>11</sup> Temple architecture, streets, and buildings are located in a concentric pattern based on the ancient architecture book *Vāstu Sāstra*. Its center is the main deity shrine of Nataraja temple. Residential segregation also follows the social hierarchical structure. Residences of the upper castes are predominantly found around the temple.

<sup>12</sup> This car is a float on which a god is placed and pulled by devotees during a temple festival.

<sup>13</sup> The front approaches from the precincts of the temple to East Car street.



and cars stop on this street, accommodation facilities concentrate along the route to the bus stand. Although there are also some garment stores, a supermarket, and stores selling household items on South Car Street, main commercial site is located in the western area of the temple. Because the eastern Chidambaram is a coastal area, transportation route developed in the western area since the ninth century. This route connects Chidambaram to big cities including Chennai, Tiruchirappali, Thanjavur and Madurai. Many garment, hardware, ornament, and fruit stores line up along West Car Street.

Jewelry shops concentrate along Kasu Kadai Street, extending from West Sannathi. There is a busy vegetable market on the back side of West Car Street. Two public facilities of merchant caste Chettiyar (*cēttiram*) are located on South and West Car Street. These are used for accommodations during their pilgrimage. No shops sell meat or eggs around Nataraja temple. These non-vegetarian shops concentrate in the northwestern area, far from Car Street. This area and the area located between North Car Street and Tillai Kali Amman Temple, are residential quarters with poor security for the working class.

A population of those engaged in dairy industry, called Konar (skt: *Yādav*), reside in the western side of the town. They bred the cows in the area. Now their financial status has improved with higher education. They are now one of the most affluent communities in Chidambaram.

In the present town structure, there informally exists a residential compartmentalization according to caste community, especially among the Brahmin caste. However, the town structure is shifting from religious compartmentalization, and mixed settlements have increased as a result of higher education, economic power, and remittance from diaspora families settled in foreign countries.

### 3. Residential Space

Dikshitar houses are located very close to the temple. I have recounted their lifestyle and the surrounding environment. Their strict custom on purity/impurity are strongly reflected in the room layout and in how people move within the residential space. The architectural feature is unique, different from those found in other communities. In this section, I first discuss the basic room layout of traditional terrace-style house in Tamil Nadu, i.e. that of a traditional Dikshitar's house, and compare it to a new house. I then describe the features of their houses and reveal the changes.

#### 3-1 Basic room layout of a Traditional terrace-style House

The basic room layout of a traditional terrace-style house is observed in temple towns and urban areas of Tamil Nadu. The courtyard is surrounded by masonry buildings (Figure 2). An attic space is also used for storage after placing a long board on the timber, which came to

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be called *maccu*. Other planar features are described in Figure 3. These features are generally observed regardless of castes.

A verandah (*tiṇṇai*) is situated one level higher than the ground and along the street. This is built in front of a house, and a lattice partitions the boundary between the street and verandah. Roof is supported with wooden or stone pillars, some of which are decorated with carvings or paintings. Verandah is considered as a buffering space between inside and outside of the house, functioning as a simple reception space. People sit and enjoy watching traffic and pleasant chats in this well-ventilated space.

Inner courtyard (*murram*) is located in the middle of the house. Basically, the traditional house has no windows; that prevents the house from strong sunlight and heat. Moreover, the courtyard facilitates ventilation and lighting. The family can enjoy cool breeze and bright sunlight during daytime, and moonlight at night inside their house. Hooks for hanging a traditional swing (*uñcal*) still remain on the top grid. The courtyard is used as the place for a bride and a groom to sit during their marriage ceremony. As an only open vertical space that directly connects outer space with the other world inside the house, it is also a place to worship god<sup>14</sup>. The open hall (*kūṭam*) is situated around the courtyard and is used for a variety

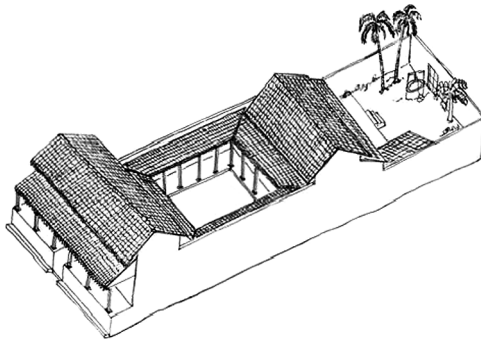


Figure 2. Birds-Eye View of Traditional Terrace-Style House (Dulau 1993: 81)

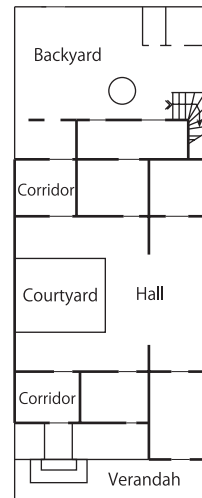


Figure 3. Basic Room Layout of Traditional Terrace-Style House (created from Dulau 1993: 79)

<sup>14</sup> Gell pointed out that swinging causes people to lose their sense of balance, make them dizzy, and trigger them to enter a kind of trance. Such condition leads people to identify with god supernaturally (Gell 1980).

of purposes, such as family gatherings, dining and living, and for sleeping at night.

This house customarily has a backyard (*tōttam*). A lavatory, bathroom, and well is located in an area paved with concrete or stone. Various kinds of trees, such as fruits, coconut, and henna (*Lawsonia inermis*<sup>15</sup>), are planted in the innermost area of the backyard.

Doors of the main rooms are arranged in a straight line from the entrance to backyard. The corridor (*naṭai*) allows air to flow as the main flow in the house, ensuring ventilation in a tropical climate.

In residential space, directions and behaviors have a close relationship. In Hindu cosmology, behavior in a residential space is described as an image connected with particular direction. East means light, warmth, joy, and prosperity in life, while west is connected to darkness, coldness, death, and decline. North means moon, peace, mildness, and comfort, and south is an image for Yama, who controls death. Therefore, people would take medicine while facing west with a hope for early recovery. When people wear gold ornament, they face east and hope for prosperity and wealth<sup>16</sup>. According to Sekine (1992), who researched a southern agricultural village in Tamil Nadu, southwest is considered to be under the control of a virgin goddess Kanni, who died unmarried with sexual potentiality. Anyone with ritual impurity during their first menstruation, childbirth, or death is isolated in a room located in southwestern corner. This is a place to connect with the other world, despite its location inside the residential space.

### 3-2 The traditional Dikshitar House

The number of traditional Dikshitar houses have decreased year after year because of modernization and motorization. Today, more than ten houses can barely be seen in the center of the town. Facade of a Dikshitar house is easily distinguished, because the window back is painted in a white-and-red-striped pattern (Photo 1). The same pattern is seen on the outer wall of a Śiva temple. White symbolizes Śiva, and red represents his wife Śakti. This can be seen in not only a traditional house but also in a recently reconstructed one. When compared with traditional terrace-style house described above, a Dikshitar house has the following features.

There are two main streams of human traffic in the house, in which the public and private are clearly distinguished. The main flow is public, along a straight line from entrance to backyard. The other is private. It is also a straight line, but not directly connect to the outer space. This is a vestige of caste segregation in the past when it was considered impure

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<sup>15</sup> Henna (*Lawsonia inermis*) is a shrubby tree that belongs to the lythraceae family. Leaf paste is used for body paint and red-colored temporary tattoos (*marutāni*) on hands and feet to draw auspicious designs.

<sup>16</sup> Duvvury 1991: 95, Deaniel 1984: 176–177 and personal interview with a Dikshitar (2009.9.21).

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for non-Brahmin people to enter and share Dikshitar houses. Brahmin, including Dikshitar, basically hesitate another caste entering their houses. Public flows are used when guests are non-Dikshitar. Moreover, one of the two courtyards are considered public, and another as private. Different timbers are used for each courtyard. Expensive domestic or Burmese rosewood and teak are used in public space (Photo 2), while cheaper local timber are used in private space (Photo 3). In Hindu customs, small lamps are lit on both sides of the entrance every evening. Two niches are found on both walls of the entrance to verandah. Hindus believe that Lakshmi, the goddess who controls wealth and fortune, uses the light of these lamps to find her way into their houses. This is also the religious reason for the straight main flow through the house. Lakshmi prefers to go straight from entrance to backyard<sup>17</sup>.

A separate room or space is used to isolate a menstruating woman. A woman's impurity is thought to be transmitted by touching. Because direct contact is to be strictly avoided, and a woman is spatially isolated. This room is called an impure room (*tīṭṭu arai*). It is located in the innermost half-open space, separated from verandah by a wall, an annex in backyard, or a small space found along the private flow or a part of upstairs. In case of a flat, because of spatial limitations, curtain is used to make a small space in the corner of the room.

Some of the architectural decorations are based on Shilpa Shastra (skt: śilpa śāstra)<sup>18</sup>.



Photo 1. Façade of a Dikshitar's House



Photo 2. Pillars in a Hall

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<sup>17</sup> Personal interview with a Dikshitar (2007. 4. 17).

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Motif of a banana, especially its branch with abundant fruit is preferably used as a symbol of fertility in temple architecture. This can be found on top of the big stone pillars in Nataraja temple. The same motif is sometime used in public space of the house (Photo 4). During domestic ceremonies related to marriage and childbirth, Dikshitaras decorate their facades with banana stems and ornaments. Those who value traditions always take their food on banana leaves. Lotus motif is also considered auspicious and is used for decoration.

The Tulsi (*Ocimum Sanctum*) is kept in middle of a courtyard. In Hindu religion, tulsi is deified nature as Tulsi-devi, such as with Bhudevi, the goddess of the earth; Lakshmi, the

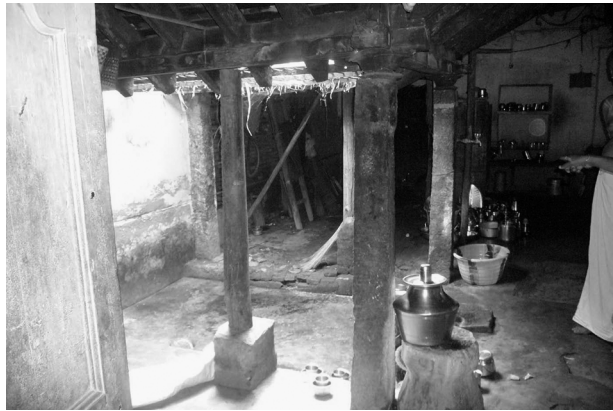


Photo 3. A Private Courtyard



Photo 4. Decoration with a Motif of Bananas

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<sup>18</sup> The scripture describes the basic principal of formative art, such as architecture and fine art.

goddess of rice; and Ganga-devi, the goddess of the river. Since Tulsi-devi is regarded as one of the avatars of goddess Lakshmi, she is worshiped alongside Lakshmi during domestic rituals<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, a woman during her menstrual period should avoid touching tulsi plant. Since tulsi is effective against sore throats, coughs, and colds according to Ayurvedic remedies, it is supposed to be planted in a courtyard, where residents always have contact with outer air, possibly catching a cold.

Verandahs were traditionally used as a space for patron devotees (*kattalaitār*) to stay during their pilgrimage to Nataraja temple. They sometime become the patrons of the temple through particular Dikshitar, or pay a certain amount as annual contract to have a Dikshitar priest perform their private religious activities. At one point, there was almost no lodge or hotel in Chidambaram, and accommodation for pilgrims (such as *cēttiram*) were only available for wealthy people. When devotees with financial difficulty came on pilgrimage, verandahs were provided for sleeping spaces at night. Slightly high concrete served as a pillow, which can still be observed today.

Dikshitar's strict distinction between purity and impurity affects the usage of rooms and the flow of human traffic in residential space. Having the same decorations as temple architecture is related to their status as temple priests. Use of verandah as a space for their devotees can only be found in priests' houses.

Considering the relationship between directions and behaviors, Sekine (1992)'s research area was a village mostly consisted of detached houses. On the other hand, a Dikshitar's house is built to encircle the temple and adjacent houses share the walls. Thus, the isolated room for menstruating woman is sometimes located in the west or south side of the house. The actual room layout does not always correspond to directions religiously considered ideal. Moreover, it is difficult to apply *Vāstu Maṇḍala* for room layout in terrace-style houses with a narrow and long plan<sup>20</sup>. However, kitchen (*camaiyal arai; attuṭṭu arai*) is arranged in south-east, and a cooking stove commonly faces east. East is controlled by the fire god Agni, and sunlight from the east protects fertility that cooking stove produce.

### 3-3 Residential Space of Gopal's House

In this section, I describe how Dikshitars behave in their residential space. Taking Gopal's family as an empirical case, I note the family relationships, function of space, boundary, and comparison between new and old houses. It is a detached house along North Car

<sup>19</sup> Generally, worship of the tulsi is more popular among the Vaishnavite sect. Although Dikshitars belong to the Shaivite sect, there are families whose family god is Vishnu or Lakshmi. Attached tulsi plant is commonly found in houses with traditional layout.

<sup>20</sup> A particular god and goddess are arranged in *Maṇḍala* by ceremonial transfer of deity to squares divided with a grid pattern. Examples are northeast for Vāyu (God of wind), southeast for Agni (God of fire), south for Yama (God of death) and northeast for Iśa (Śiva).

Street. Gopal's family consists of 10 members: the first son Gopal, his wife, and three children; the third son Murugan and his wife; the second son Natarajan who is a bachelor; yet to be married fourth son Kumar; and Gopal's aunt Umapathi. The family belongs to a special family group (*pankāli*)<sup>21</sup> with an exclusive right to serve as priests in both Nataraja temple and Tillai Kali Amman temple, the goddess of which was once a native god in Chidambaram. The current house was donated by a devotee who belonged to the Kaundar caste community in Selam<sup>22</sup> during the time of Gopal's grandfather, and the devotee's family god was Kali. Gopal's grandfather was said to have the ability to directly talk to the goddess Kali, and that Kali followed him walking, ringing her anklet (*kolusu*)<sup>23</sup>. He also performed *pūjā* for six months and led a dissipated life during the remainder of the year. Although this is an unprecedented episode in Dikshitar families strictly following religious rules, the case illustrates that his grandfather was a legendary person with special power.

### 3-3-1 Family Relations

Figure 5 shows the relations of Gopal's family members. As his parents have already passed away, Gopal (GO)<sup>24</sup> is the family head. He is the eldest of four brothers and three sisters. His hand is colored red because he performs the [*Kālī pūjā*] with sacred red powder (*kunkumam*) in Thillai Kali temple everyday. Parvati (pa) is Gopal's wife, a compassionate 36-year-old woman. They have three children: the elder son Chandran (CA) studies electric engineering at Annamalai University, the elder daughter Gayatri (ga) is a diligent 12<sup>th</sup> standard student<sup>25</sup>, and the younger daughter Ambika (am) is a cheerful 10<sup>th</sup>

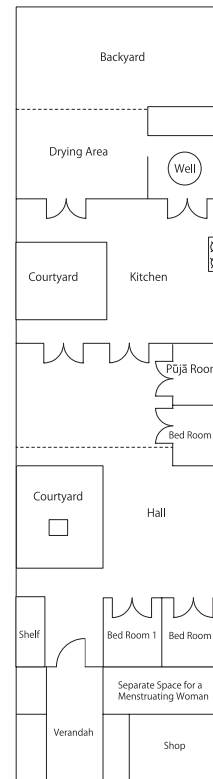


Figure 4. Traditional Room Layout of a Dikshitar

<sup>21</sup> Pankali is the group of male paternal relatives, including brothers, paternal uncles, and cousins.

<sup>22</sup> Selam is a commercial city located in western Tamil Nadu.

<sup>23</sup> *kolusu* means anklet in Tamil.

<sup>24</sup> Names of male family member is abbreviated in capital letters and those of female in small letters.



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standard student. Although Chandran and Gayatri are married, they live together with their parents in Gopal's house. In case of Dikshitar, even married couples live separately before their first night ceremony (*cānti mukūrttam*)<sup>26</sup>. Natarajan (NA) is Gopal's brother, born with disabled hand. Because he is unmarried and cannot perform temple work, he spends most of his time at home, sleeping in the hall. Gopal's second younger brother, Murugan (MU) has already performed his first night ceremony in 2007, but he has no children. Aishwaria (as) is Murugan's wife and handles domestic works well. She plays a secondary role in cooking such as serving food when joining the kitchen. Kumar (KU) is 25 years old and the youngest brother of Gopal. He spends most of his time outside the house except for sleeping and eating food in the hall. He performed his first night ceremony in October 2009 and took Meenakshi (mi) as his wife. Kumar started sleeping with her in GO's previous room as Gopal shifted to a new house after this ceremony (in Figure 7). Umapathi (um) is a widow, Gopal's maternal aunt. She came to live in Gopal's house after Gopal's mother passed away. She stays at home except for going to Nataraja temple to watch a wake-up ceremony for god (*pāl nivētanam*) at 5:30 every morning. There are other relatives who live in separate houses but under the same roof. Kamatchi (ka) and Priya (pr) are Gopal's sisters. They are married and usually live in their in-law's houses, but they take turns to prepare food so that one of them always stays in Gopal's house. Aswin (AS), the first son of Kamatchi, rarely goes back to his own house and sleeps at Gopal's. During Kamatchi or Priya's stays in Gopal's house, their

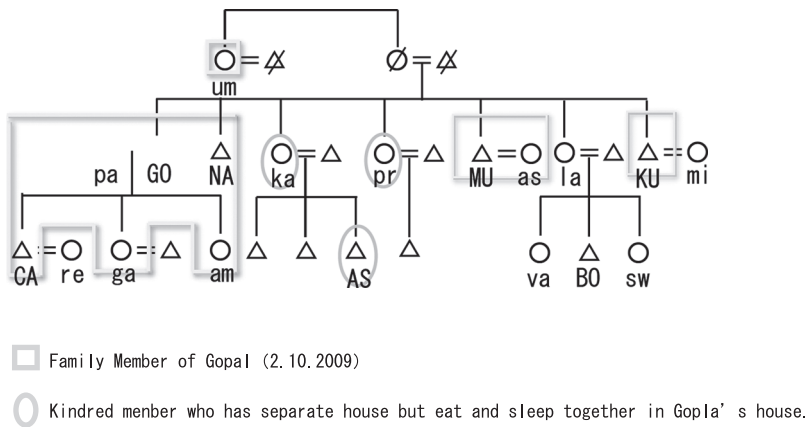


Figure 5. Family Relations in Gopal Family

<sup>25</sup> 12th standard corresponds to the 3rd year of High school in Japan.

<sup>26</sup> This ceremony is celebrated when a bride and groom spend a whole night together in their bedroom for the first time. In case of Dikshitar, a bride starts to live with in-law's house after this ceremony.



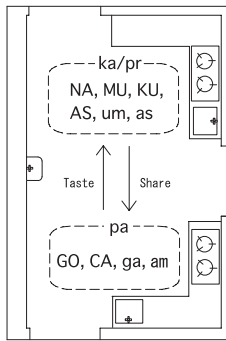


Figure 6. Relationships in a Kitchen

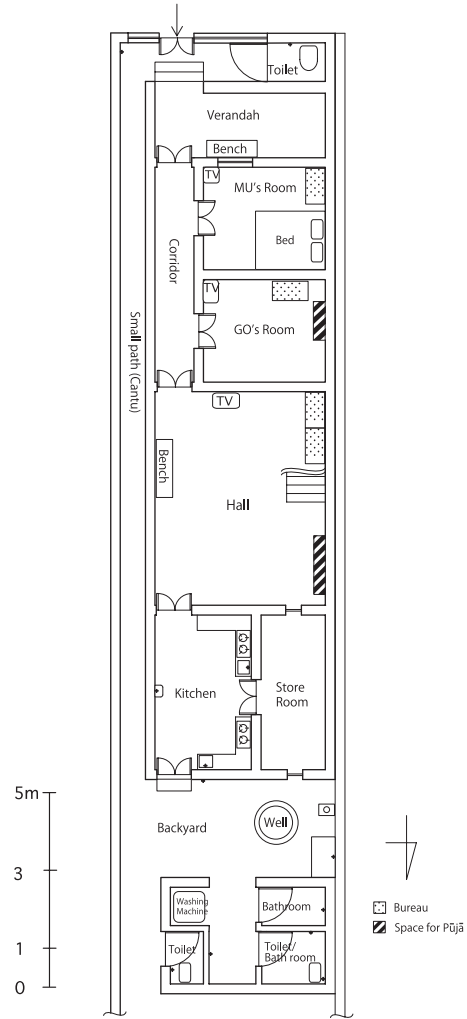


Figure 7. Room Layout of Gopal's House

husbands and sons eat together and go back to sleep in their own house at night. The other sons stay in boarding school (skt: *pāṭha śālā*) to study the *Vēda*, and are usually not home.

These relationships are also observed in the kitchen space. A family is expected to share the house as well as cooking fire. Cooking space in kitchen is divided into two. Not only cooking fire, but also tools and space are separated. Gopal's family members, including Priya and Kamatchi, are also divided into two groups according to the cooking stoves they use (see

Figure 6). Each of them eat food cooked on the same stove. Kamatchi appreciates Parvati's cooking ability, and always asks Parvati to taste her dishes. Kamatchi and Priya share curry and side dishes with Parvati's family. Conversely, Parvati rarely does so. If Parvati is on her menstrual period and cannot cook, members of Parvati's cooking stove do not share the dishes with Kamatchi or Priya. Her children prepare quick-cooking items (*capṭāti* or *tōcai*) or eat dishes that their maternal grandmother prepare. Moreover, Kamatchi and Priya asks their grandmother how to cook snacks (*palakāram*) or sweets (*miṭṭāy*), special food items prepared for domestic ceremonies, and not Parvati even if she knew how to cook. But all of them cook together during domestic rituals (Photo 5). A complicated relationship between the wife of the eldest son and the sister-in-law is visible in the kitchen. There are two reasons. The first reason is the strong position of the eldest sister Kamatchi. The another reason is the strong tie between the families of Gopal and Parvati. Kamatchi has played a leading role in Gopal's house since their mother passed away. She took care of marriage rites of her younger brothers and domestic rituals, as well as their daily lives. Therefore, her younger sister and brothers don't go against Kamatchi. On the other hand, Gopal, his wife Parvati, and their children have developed strong relationships with Parvati's parents and her younger brother (maternal uncle for their children). Gopal leaves his duty or patron management of Nataraja temple entirely to his brother-in-law, because he is busy for his priestly work in Tillai Kali temple. Chandran also learned how to work in Nataraja temple from his maternal uncle and still sleeps at his house. Gopal's children don't emotionally rely on paternal family members.

### 3-3-2 Function of Space

Each room has its specific characteristics and functions, starting from entrance on the



Photo 5. Women Cooking during a Domestic Ritual

street (see Figure 7). The entrance (*vācal paṭi*) is cleaned with water every morning and evening, where an auspicious design (*kōlam*) is drawn with rice powder. Verandah (*tiṇṇai*) can be seen from outside, and is a buffering space between inner and outer part of the house. The innermost area on the west is an isolated space for menstruating women. Vegetable, curd, or flower vendors come everyday and sell their goods in verandah.

There is a small path (*cantu*) in the east that passes through the verandah to backyard. This path has no roof and none of the family members except for menstruating women use it. Maidservants use this path to wash dishes and clothes instead of inside the house. People have to pass through the kitchen to go to the bathroom located in the backyard. The kitchen is very crowded in the morning for preparation of breakfast. When Priya saw children trying to go to the bathroom through this path, she chastised them. On that day, there were no menstruating women in the house, so nobody shared the flow with an impure person. The pure/impure human flow was clearly distinguished.

Sometimes, a flower vender woman comes into the corridor. There are two bedrooms (*tūnkum arai*: sleeping room) in the west. One is for Murugan and Aishwariya (Mu's Room in Figure 7). A TV set, bureau<sup>27</sup>, and bed are kept in the room. The layout is almost the same as that of Gopal's, but they never take food into their own room. Except when Murugan and his wife are sleeping in this room at night, children watch TV, and Kamatchi or Priya change their clothes in this room. An isolated menstruating woman sits on the long chair in verandah and sometimes watches TV through the window of Murugan's room.

Family members of Parvati's cooking stove group would sleep in Gopal's room. All of the household goods and clothes of five members are kept in this small room of 2.6m × 3.2m. This space is just enough for four members to sleep. Chandran habitually has slept in his maternal grandparent's home since childhood. It is a ten-minute walk from his house. Gopal also used to sleep inside the temple. Hindu idols are kept on a small shelf on the western wall, where daily religious ritual is performed. With an exception of Gopal, his wife and children hardly relax in the hall and enter Murugan's room.

The members of Kamatchi and Priya's cooking stove eat food in the hall. There is no courtyard in this hall. Religious tools and their parents' portrait are kept in the northwest of the hall. Two bureaus are found in the southwest corner. With an exception of Parvati's relatives, guests are invited to this hall and are asked to sit on the bench or a single plastic chair. The sacred fire ritual (skt: *homa*) is performed here during domestic rituals. Everybody sleeps directly on the bare floor without a straw mat (*pāi*). Sometimes, Murugan also sleeps here.

The kitchen is situated in the innermost part of the house. Hindu custom believes that a

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<sup>27</sup> A bureau is an item of furniture with a lock to keep clothes, ornaments, and others. It is similar to a wardrobe or locker.

person's character is determined by what he/she ingests into their body. Meat-eaters involved in killing are considered more impure than vegetarians (Fuller 2004). Furthermore, there is a distinction between hot and cold in food and beverages. A person's health is also considered to depend on the balance between hot and cold food that he consumes (Beck 1969). Since Dikshitaras directly make contact with gods as religious professionals, they are expected to preserve their ritual purity. Therefore, kitchen, where food is prepared is more strictly controlled than other spaces. Most outsiders cannot enter their kitchen. Cooking the food is important because it is offered for gods. Although the sink is attached in the east, it is only used for washing hands and mouths.

A shed located next to the kitchen is simply called the store room. The door is always left open. Kept here are not large furniture or valuables, but big vessels and cooking tools that are rarely used. Kamatchi, Priya, and Umapathi usually sleep in the hall and change their clothes in this store room after bathing. When a domestic ritual by an auspicious married woman (*cumaṅkalī pūjā*<sup>28</sup>) is held in the hall, female relatives ritually change to new clothes here.

Everyone who lives in this house commonly use the toilet and bathroom in the backyard. Water pipe behind the kitchen is used for washing faces and brushing teeth. Aswin and small children sometimes bathe themselves in this open space. A stone mill (*ammi*) is kept to the west of the well. Maidservants wash vessels with water pipe located in the northeast corner. Dust bin for leftovers is kept just beside the exit from the kitchen. There are two toilets, a bathroom, and a small space for a washing machine in a separate building. This washing machine is only used by family members of Kamatchi and Priya. Parvati's family, Gayathri and Ambika wash their clothes by themselves while bathing, and Parvati washes both her husband's and son's clothes.

### 3-3-3 Boundary

There are evident boundaries within residential place, revealed through the time Gopal's family members spend in different rooms. As seen in Figure 8, there is a clear difference between gender. Female members (Parvati, Gayatri and Ambika) spend more time in Gopal's private room, and males (Gopal and Chandran) mostly go outside. The purpose of going out is also different. For females, it is mainly for daily groceries shopping such as oil and milk. They usually come back home within 30 minutes, unless they go to the temple. On the other hand, males spend most of their time in the temple. The contrast between female's domestic world and male's public world is obvious.

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<sup>28</sup> A married woman whose husband is alive has an auspicious power and plays a ritual role. *cumaṅkalī pūjā* is a ritual to pray for the ceremony's success using *cumaṅkalī*'s power. It is held a couple of auspicious days before the rite of passage. *Cumaṅkalī* receives a new sari from the master of the ritual and changes her dress during the ritual.

Boundary of intimate human relationships corresponds to boundary of physical space (Figure 9)<sup>29</sup>. I analyzed the boundary between purity and impurity based on a full-day observation conducted on October 2, 2009. In particular, I noted the difference of movements between relatives and outsiders. There was Parvati, who completed her impure period of menstruation that morning, and Lakshmi, who came back from her in-laws' house because her menstrual period started that day. The total number of outsiders was 12–18 relatives and 6 non-relatives. A water vender is regarded as an exception<sup>30</sup>. Outsiders, other than relatives, basically never come into the inner space (demonstrated by a two-dotted dashed line in Figure 9). Maidservant never crosses the corridor and the hall, but uses the eastern small path (*cantu*) to go to the backyard. On the other hand, in the case of guests who are Dikshitar relatives, male relatives relaxed in the hall and females went to the kitchen without hesitation. Family members and relatives keep their footwear on the inner side of the entrance. However, non-relatives would remove their footwear before crossing the entrance. The space surrounded by bold line is the most protected area under privacy of intimate activity such as sexual acts. At times when the family pays special attention to ritual purity, such as the anniversary of an ancestor's death (*dēvacamam*), outsiders are strictly prohibited from entering the kitchen. They also give extra consideration to clothes, a medium that transmits impurity. A cloth must be purified with water after wearing, and kept in separate bureau or in a box in MU's room or GO's Room (bold line in Figure 9). Change of clothes takes place only these specific spaces to prevent purified cloth from tainting by having contact with materials with impure substance. Behaviors of Parvati and Lakshmi reflects the allotment of space con-

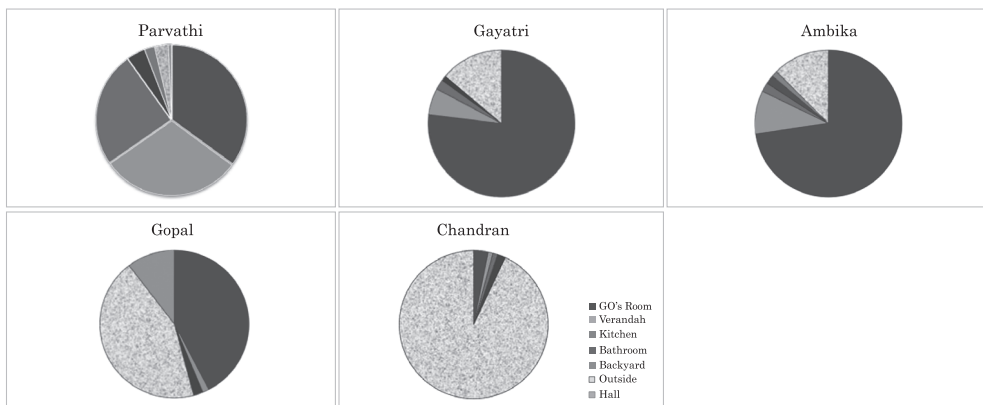


Figure 8. Time Spent in Different Rooms

<sup>29</sup> See Uchibori (2006).

<sup>30</sup> A water vender came to change a 30 L drinking water bottle kept in the hall.

cerning purity and impurity. That morning, Parvati called Ambika from verandah outside the corridor and asked her to open the door to let her pass through the small path (*cantu*) for bathing. That prevented Parvati with menstrual impurity from making contact to the other family members. Then Lakshmi enjoyed chatting with her sister and Parvati across the door from the backyard. In these examples, the space surrounded by two-dotted dashed line should not be affected by menstrual impurity.

A symbolic division between the inside and outside is observed as a distinguished boundary. In Bourdieu's words, the threshold owes its "function as a magical boundary" (Bourdieu 1990: 281). The first boundary is found in an auspicious design (*kōlam*) drawn outside of the entrance on the street (boundary of dashed line). The second boundary is found in a niche for lighting a lamp on the wall on both sides of the door in verandah (two-dotted dashed line). Every boundary is also said to be connected to symbolism of goddess as well as the temple of the goddess located on the town's boundary.

The auspicious design (*kōlam*) means and functions as a boundary marker. Generally, *kōlam* has three roles. First, as it is drawn with rice flour, it shows an invitation for Lakshmi, the goddess of rice. It indicates the way not only for the goddess, but also for male gods during a temple festival. When a lamp is lit on both sides of the entrance door to invite Lakshmi, the back door located on the straight line must be closed. If the back door is kept open, the goddess Mūdēvī, who controls misfortune, might come into the house instead of Lakshmi. Second, it is an act of charity towards small creatures like ants and can mark identifications for renouncers and pilgrims asking for alms. Third, it avoids outsiders' feelings of jealous and envy and prevents evil

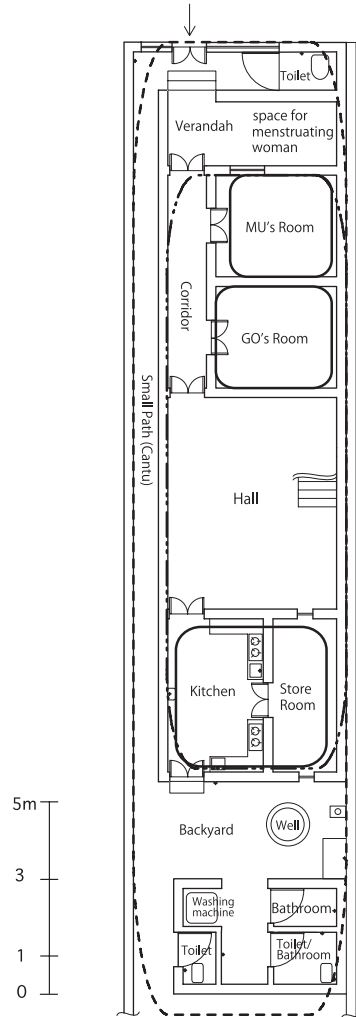


Figure 9. Boundaries in Gopal's House

eyes from coming inside. Concerning the geometric design of *kōlam*, Gell pointed out that the pattern is related to protective and auspicious cobras in Hindu religion. Its design is also like a maze that functions as to trap any evil spirits that attempt to enter the house from outside (Gell 1998: 84). The *kōlam* is drawn during twilight hours just before dawn and sunset. In particular, time between 4 am and 6:30 am is called *Brahmā muhūrta*<sup>31</sup>, and it is believed that god turns his face toward human beings during this period. We can therefore see that the *kōlam* separates inside and outside, protects boundaries, and indicates where god meets humans in the residential space.

In short, strict religious customs concerning purity/impurity as well as regulation on woman are strongly reflected in the room layout, internal mobility, spaces where residents choose to spend their time, and boundary setting.

#### 4. Comparison between Old and New Houses

##### 4-1 Polarization

If modernization is seen as a tendency toward rationalization and westernization of life, a Dikshitar is regarded as a kind of role model for traditional Hindu who faithfully keeps traditional religious values and performs rituals. However, Dikshitar houses tend to polarize with growing financial difficulties. In some households, the family is involved in other jobs as well as the priest's work in the temple. In other households, the family engages exclusively in the temple priest profession. In the former, people may have professional jobs in universities and banks. Some of them work as professors, lecturers, or administrative staffs in Annamalai University, located 3 km southeast from Chidambaram. Moreover, priests who have learnt the *Vēda* in *pāṭha śālā* after the sacred thread ceremony (skt: *upanayanam*) have a special skill, and are engaged as teachers to educate priests' children. They also actively participate in ritual performances at big religious ceremonies held at well-known temples across India and abroad. They can earn a relatively steady income. Some of them live in a detached house of two generations under one roof, or their son and wives may live independently in flats. These young couples are equipped with a washing machines and some of them use computers at home.

The latter group solely working as priests at Nataraja temple tend to face financial difficulties. Many priests struggle to acquire new devotees. Their income has declined due to closing of the *prasāda*<sup>32</sup> stall and a decrease of annual duty of twenty days, which rotates once a year for every Dikshitar priest. One of the Dikshitars mentioned that he earns only Rs. 700 per month from the temple. His duty is to watch the temple for security at night. Even if

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<sup>31</sup> *Brahmā muhūrta* means a period of supreme god, Brahmā.

<sup>32</sup> An offering was removed from the alter. Sweets and snacks are sold in this stall.

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priests face financial difficulties, they never omit their rites of passage and domestic rituals. They also need to come up with a huge amount of money, around Rs. 300,000 (minimum) for marriage or sacred thread ceremony. Some families perform siblings' ceremonies at the same time to save any extravagant expenses. Still, some had to sell part of their traditional house or rent a part of their verandah as a shop to maintain religious practices. Chandran's marriage in Gopal's family was held on the same day as the sacred thread ceremony of his wife Revathi's brother, and her family sold the front half of their traditional terrace-style house. There is an alley where economically challenged families live along the northwest of north temple tower. On the other hand, relatively affluent families live in a detached house or a flat. Residential space is thus becoming polarized.

In consideration of purity and impurity in residential space, a menstruating woman will be isolated in the bed room among a family who live in an incapacious flat. Other members are prevented from approaching her and are supposed to keep their distance when she crosses the hall to go to the toilet. Some families place curtains to create a regulated space in the corner of the room.

### **4-2 Chandran's New House**

In October 2009, Gopal's youngest brother Kumar held his first night ceremony to take Meenakshi as a wife to his house. Gopal constructed a new house in the innermost part of the backyard. This was for Chandran, who will welcome his wife Revathi in the near future (Figure 10). Compared with Figure 7, two similarities are found: verandah between entrance and hall, and doors lined up from entrance to backyard. The space for a menstrual impurity is also in the southwest.

The difference is an ensuite bathroom inside the residential space for Chandran and his prospective wife. Although there are bedrooms in the new house, Gopal, Parvati, Gayatri and Ambika would sleep in the hall together, and Chandran would go to his maternal grandparent's house after 10 pm and sleeps there. The attached bathroom in Bedroom 1 is for washing body. While sexual intercourse between husband and wife is regarded as pure, but bodily fluid after the sexual behavior as impure. So if a couple goes to the temple after sexual intercourse, they must take a bath and wash their hair, especially the wife. Therefore, this attached bathroom is constructed for young couple's privacy, so that they don't need to pass through other's rooms.

Although there may be financial constraints, spatial restrictions, and undergoing change in the structure of the house, it is inevitable to keep the practice that distinguishes a clear boundary between pure and impure.



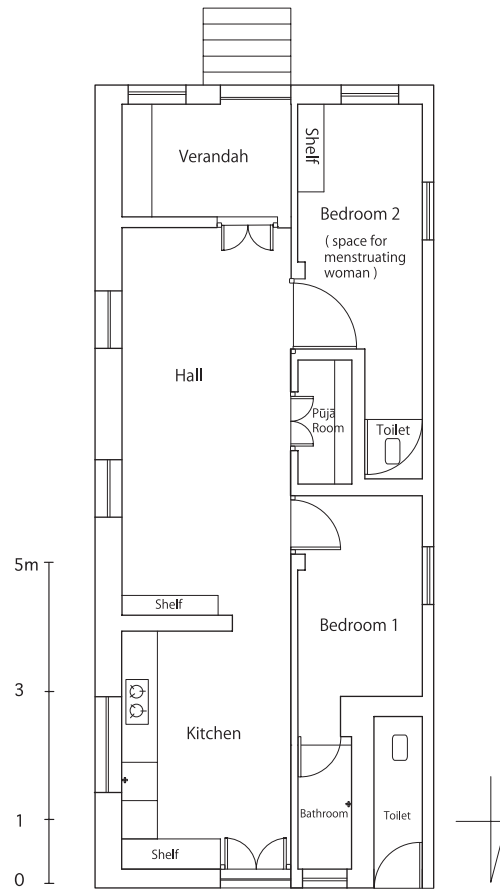


Figure 10. New Room Layout of Chandran's House

## 5. Conclusion

This article examined how the concept of purity and impurity, statically regarded as a symbolic, is considered and practiced among Dikshitars, and how the influence of modernization has shaped such considerations and practices. I discussed the concepts of purity and impurity with focus on behaviors of Dikshitars and non-Dikshitars. Dikshitars always maintain their traditional religious customs and lifestyles. Non-Dikshitars give less priority to their religious purity because they are not involved in religious performances at a temple for supreme gods, which requires strict observation of taboo. Purity is “always vulnerable to

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impure in contact” (Srinivas 1952). Therefore, Dikshitar try not to transmit impurity of the other in their daily life. They believe in the religious taboo that invasion of impure outsider may contaminate spatial purity. That causes contamination of religious performance. This is reflected in residential mobility and spatial boundaries, which distinguish Dikshitar and outsiders, and within which the ideas of purity and impurity are embedded. The outsiders also tacitly accept the boundary rule when they enter a Dikshitar house. This article also discussed how Dikshitar maintain their religious purity and traditions as successors of Hindu culture, and deal with their own financial and political difficulties. Such difficulties shape their religious practices in the passage from tradition to modernity. In terms of residential space, Dikshitar houses designed to regulate human traffic are declining. Yet, the layout and boundary is valued to prevent impurities so as not to contaminate the priest, who has contact with the gods. This indicates a strong consciousness towards the practice of purity and impurity in Dikshitar’s daily life.

Residential space where changes in material culture are markedly represented. It embodies and reproduces relationships and religious concepts through its structure and internal mobility of the residents. Dikshitar is seen as the highest caste both by themselves and others in the society. By clearly distinguishing purity and impurity in spatial contact and interpersonal relationships, Dikshitar differentiate between themselves and the rest. I have discussed briefly the influence of contemporary social change such as modern school education in this paper. However, questions that remain demand deeper examination. Future studies could focus on intimate relationships in residential space, including a couple, parents and children, and also how upper caste people struggle to maintain their identity in the passage from tradition to modernity.

### Postscript

This is the revised version of an article titled ‘Contact Zone Considering the Residential Space of a Hindu Temple Priest’ published in *Contact Zone* No. 4 (2011: 116–137).

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